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The Game

It was raining the day that Mark first heard about Hitler's daughter. The cows in Harrison's paddock were wet and brown and mournful. Raindrops dripped down their noses as they huddled their backs to the wind.

There was nothing in the world quite as sad-looking as wet cows, thought Mark, as he hauled his damp schoolbag further into the bus shelter. Do cows ever get colds? he wondered. What would happen if they sneezed?

The Wallaby Creek Progress Association had built the bus shelter last year. It was made of curved yellow tin — easily big enough for the four kids who caught the bus at this corner by Harrison's bottom paddock.

The idea had been to keep the kids out of the wind and rain while they waited for the bus. In Mark's opinion the whole idea was a flop.

Before the bus shelter was built he sat in the car with Mum when it rained, dry and warm with the heater going till the bus trundled round the corner. And everyone else sat in their cars too.

Ever since the shelter had been finished Mum just dropped him off with a kiss and a wave and hurried back to the warm kitchen at home till it was time for her to leave for her job at the stock and station agent's in town, leaving him in the damp, cold bus shelter with the fingers of rainwater tickling down his neck.

Mark usually got to the bus stop first. Mum was early for *everything*, thought Mark dismally, pulling his jacket closer around his shoulders. She always left enough time to have a flat tyre AND go back if Mark forgot his homework AND fill in any note he'd forgotten to give her last night and just remembered at the bus stop, as well as —

'Hey, move your bag!' Ben shoved it out of his way as he dashed under the shelter. 'Did you see the creek? It's gone all yellow. The bridge'll go if this keeps up,' he added hopefully.

Ben lived on the other side of the paddock. It took about two minutes for him to race between the cow droppings to the bus shelter.

'Hey, have you ever noticed that cows look all shiny when they're wet?' asked Mark.

'No,' said Ben. He shoved the hood back on his parka.

'Like someone's polished them. Do you think cows can sneeze?'

Ben considered the question. 'Nope,' he said.

'How come they can't then?'

'Dunno,' said Ben.

'Maybe they only sneeze when we're not around,' decided Mark.

'Who cares?' Ben scraped his boot heels across the concrete floor to get rid of the mud. 'Hey, there's Anna.'

'Her mum must have picked up Little Tracey too,' said Mark.

Anna dashed from the car, her bag clutched close to try and protect it from the rain. Little Tracey puddled along behind her.

Little Tracey had been 'Little' since her first day on the bus. (Big Tracey got on two stops later.) Little Tracey *was* little, thought Mark. He wondered if she'd always be little — like Mum's foxie, which would grow into an ankle-biter no matter how old it was.

'Hi,' said Anna, dumping her bag in the shelter.

'Hi,' said Mark. 'Hey, Anna, have you ever heard a cow sneeze?'

Anna considered. 'No,' she admitted.

Little Tracey shoved her bag under the seat and plunked herself down beside the others. She wore yellow gumboots, splattered with orange clay. 'Anna says we can play The Game!' she announced.

Ben shrugged, and went back to scraping the mud off his boots. 'I don't mind,' he said.

'Alright,' said Mark obligingly. The Game was okay, and, anyway, there wasn't anything else to do till the bus came.

The Game had started last year on Little Tracey's second day at school. She had cried, remembered Mark, with great deep sniffs and her eyes resolutely wide as though that could keep the tears away.

Anna had grabbed Little Tracey's hand and hauled her into the bus shelter and announced, 'Let's play a game.'

Little Tracey sniffed back more tears.

'What sort of game?' asked Mark. He hoped it wasn't going to be I Spy or something dumb like that.

'The Story Game,' said Anna. 'I used to play it with my grandma.'

Little Tracey looked up enquiringly at Anna, blinking her wet eyelashes.

'You make up a character,' Anna said to Little Tracey, 'and I'll make up a story about them.'

Mark thought it sounded boring, but Little Tracey sat still, quietly sniffing, so, to be helpful, Mark said, 'Okay. How about a story about a ... a ... an alien who comes to earth.'

Anna shook her head. 'It's Tracey's story,' she said. 'What do you want a story about Tracey?'

Little Tracey sniffled.

'How about a fish?' suggested Mark helpfully. 'Or a whale or a mermaid or a ...' He hesitated. What were little kids interested in?

'A horse,' Little Tracey whispered suddenly. 'I want a story about a horse.'

Anna grinned. 'Okay,' she said. 'What's the horse's name?'

'Socks,' said Little Tracey. 'And he's got a baby brother called ... called Buttons and he lives in a paddock with his mum and dad and ...'

That was the beginning of The Game.

They'd played The Game every day for a week until Little Tracey got used to the bus and school, and then they played it just for a treat on her birthday, or when it rained and you couldn't leave the shelter to play catch and the wind was biting at your ankles.

The rain gurgled down the gutter, hiccuped at a bit of rock, then sped down and round the corner to the creek. A cow mooed sadly across the wet grass.

Maybe if a cow got hay fever it'd sneeze, thought Mark. 'Okay, what do you want the story to be about?' he asked.

'I want a story about ... about a fairy,' said Little Tracey, drumming her muddy heels on her schoolbag.

Ben groaned. 'How about something good — like a gangster? Hey, how about a gangster who steals a million dollars and ...'

'How about a dinosaur?' suggested Mark.

'A baby one,' agreed Tracey eagerly. 'A baby dinosaur called Billie and she gets separated from her mother and ...'

'Blerck!' snorted Ben rudely.

'I'll choose this time,' said Anna suddenly.

Mark stared. 'But you never choose.'

Anna shrugged. 'Then it's my turn isn't it?'

'Just choose something decent,' said Ben. 'No fairies or goldfish like the last time.'

'I'm getting another goldfish next time we go to town,' said Tracey. 'It's going to be black and red and ...'

'How can you have a black and red goldfish?' demanded Ben. 'That's dumb.'

'The bus'll be here if you don't shut up,' said Mark. 'Go on Anna. What's the story going to be about?'

Anna hesitated. 'It's ... it's about Hitler's daughter,' she announced.

'Hey cool,' said Ben.

'Who's Hitler?' demanded Little Tracey.

'He was this bloke in World War Two,' explained Ben. 'He was the leader of Germany — they were the enemy in the war. Well, Japan was too. But Hitler had all these Brownshirts and the Gestapo and they tortured people and had concentration camps and things like that and everyone had to go "Siegheil!" or "Heil Hitler! ". You know, like in those movies on TV.'

'But Hitler didn't have a daughter,' protested Mark.

'Who cares?' said Ben. 'Hitler's better than fairies and goldfish. Maybe she was a fighter pilot like the Red Baron! No, that was World War One, wasn't it? Hey, did you know it was an Australian that shot him down? Pow, pow, pow, pow, pow.'

'But ...' objected Mark. He tried to explain. 'But we can't have a story about something that's not real.'

'Why not?' demanded Ben. 'Fairies and dumb stuff aren't real, are they?'

'No, of course not. But ...'

'They are too real,' interrupted Little Tracey.

'But ...' Mark stopped. It *did* seem different somehow to make up stuff about a real person.

But there was no way he could put his feeling into words. 'Okay then,' he said finally. 'What was her name?'

'Valdimara,' said Ben with glee.

'You got that from TV last night,' objected Mark.

'You know, that Vampire Princess thing.'

'So what?'

'You can't have someone from TV in The Game.'

Anyway, Valdiwhatsit isn't German.'

'Austrian,' said Anna softly. 'Hitler was Austrian.'

'What's the difference?' said Ben, irritated. 'Who knows any Austrian names anyway?'

'Her name was Heidi,' stated Little Tracey.

'But that's from that soppy book ...'

'Oh, for Pete's sake, what does it matter?' demanded Mark. 'The bus'll be here soon. Go on, Anna. Her name was Heidi and she was Hitler's daughter.'

'And she lived in a castle,' decided Little Tracey.

'It wasn't really like a castle,' said Anna slowly.

'But it was big, with wide terraces, and so many rooms that ... that Heidi could never count them.'

Mark settled back on the seat. It always took a while for Anna to settle in to a story. But it was pretty good when she did. She always added details so you sort of saw the story in your mind.

'There were Fräulein Gelber's rooms, which smelt

of cigarettes. Fräulein Gelber wasn't supposed to smoke. Duffi said that smoking gave you cancer. He was the only leader in the world to try to stop his people smoking. But Heidi knew Fräulein Gelber still smoked anyway.

'The kitchens smelt of flour: cold flour in the sacks, and hot flour in the oven, and even spilt flour had a different smell, though when Heidi told Fräulein Gelber she just laughed.'

'There were the "don't go down there" rooms, where Duffi talked with people in uniforms and women in flowery dresses.'

'Who was Duffi?' demanded Ben.

'Hitler,' said Anna. 'I don't know why she called him Duffi. I don't even know if it means anything. It was just what she did.'

Ben sniffed. 'Dumb,' he said. 'Go on then. Get to a good part.'

'Duffi's own rooms were upstairs, but she was never to go there either. When Duffi visited he came to her rooms instead.'

Little Tracey bounced on the seat. 'What were Heidi's rooms like?'

'I'm not sure,' said Anna.

'I know,' said Little Tracey. 'They were really, really big, and everything was pink and she had one

of those beds with curtains and it was pink as well, and all of one wall was a TV and ...'

'They didn't have TV then,' objected Mark.

'Who cares?' said Ben. 'It's just a story. Go on Anna. Get to the battles.'

'The battles?'

'Yeah, you know. The good stuff. The Russian front and Rommel in Egypt and the V2 rockets.'

'How d'you know all this?' demanded Mark.

'I did a project last term, dummy. It's cool. Go on, Anna. How about she goes to Egypt with Rommel and drives a tank through the Sahara Desert? Or flies a Messerschmidt — that'd be even better.'

Anna fiddled with the zipper on her parka. 'I don't know about Messerschmidts — or about any of the battles. Look, this isn't going to work. Hitler's daughter was a silly idea. Forget I started it, okay? How about another story? Tracey, you can choose.'

'I want a story about Heidi,' said Little Tracey.

'Okay,' said Anna hurriedly. 'Let's make her a princess. Princess Heidi.'

'No,' said Little Tracey stubbornly. 'I want a story about the other Heidi. The one you were talking about.'

'But ... oh, alright then. But I can't tell you about battles. She never saw any battles.'

'She must have!' declared Ben. 'She was Hitler's daughter!'

Anna shook her head. 'He kept her away from all the battles. He kept her away from everyone. No one knew he had ever been married, and no one knew about Heidi. She lived with Fräulein Gelber at Berchtesgaden — that was where Hitler had a house in the country and that was the only world she knew.'

'But why?' insisted Mark. 'Why did he keep her secret?'

'What does it matter?' asked Ben. 'It's just a story anyway.'

'Because she had a birthmark,' said Anna softly. 'A great red blotch across her face. And one of her legs was shorter than the other, so she limped ... just a little bit.'

'But Hitler wanted to breed a perfect race — the Aryan race it was called. Children with blue eyes and blonde hair, tall children who could run and jump and conquer the world. But his daughter was small like him, and dark, and her face was marked like an iron had burnt across it, and she limped.'

'Then he didn't love her.' Little Tracey's voice was very small.

'Of course not,' said Mark. 'He was Hitler. I bet Hitler never loved anyone.'

'I don't know if he loved her or not,' said Anna. 'She always hoped he did.'

'But someone like Hitler couldn't ...' began Mark.

'Hey, here's the bus!' Ben jumped to his feet. 'That story's weird.'

'I said it wasn't working,' said Anna defensively.

'It's not weird! I like it!' insisted Little Tracey.

The bus screeched to a stop in front of them, splashing yellow water on all sides. It was the smallest on the school bus run, mini-bus size really.

'Thought you'd have melted in the rain by now,' called old Mrs Latter. She wore her green hat like a tea-cosy this morning, pulled right down over her salt-and-pepper ponytail, and she had on her green gumboots with a crack at the heel. 'Sorry I'm late. Any of you listen to that stuff the Prime Minister said on the news this morning?'

No one had.

Mrs Latter sighed. She liked a good argument about the news, which was why the bus was always late — she wanted to stop and argue about it with her husband.

'Come on, hop on then,' she said, wiping her nose on one of her husband's handkerchiefs.

Little Tracey scrambled onto the bus first, like she always did, and bounced into the front seat behind

Mrs Latter. Mark ambled behind Anna, with Ben following on his heels.

The bus lurched out from the side of the road, and began to wind its way between the paddocks. The cows watched them go, the rain dripping from their fringes, their droppings steaming on the cold ground behind them.

'Anna?'

Anna turned round. 'Yeah. What?'

'What happened to Heidi's mum?'

'I think she died,' said Anna. 'She must've died. Heidi never knew her.'

'Oh,' said Mark. He hesitated. 'Anna?'

'Yes?' Anna craned her head around again.

'Will you go on with the story tomorrow?'

'Yes. No. If it's raining maybe. I thought you didn't like it.'

'It's alright,' said Mark.